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THE COMMON PROBLEMS OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS¹

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I am to speak of the things which we have in common. This conference, as we all know, sprang from a common need, our need of acting together during the war. There were interests of importance to each of us which we could not adequately safeguard alone. There was a service we desired to render for which some organ of common expression was necessary. This double need justified our coming together. The report which we have already heard from our secretary shows that the anticipations we then entertained have more than justified themselves in fact.

The question still remains to be decided whether the interests which led to this first meeting still continue, or, if not the same interests, interests similar in nature. Are there still needs which we can best meet together, a common service which we can render? This question will be discussed in detail by others when we consider the future of this conference. What I have to offer here is a modest contribution to the discussion in the shape of an analysis of some of the factors which must determine our judgment. What action they may invite I do not here venture to suggest. It will be enough if I can describe the facts correctly.

In one sense the question may seem superfluous. Here we are, a company of theological teachers, facing the problem of the education of the American ministry in the momentous years after the war. What interests have we in common?

¹ An address delivered at the Conference of Theological Seminaries, Princeton, New Jersey, June 17, 1920.

What have we not in common? As Christians, as educators, as teachers in theological seminaries, there would seem to be no limit to the subjects in which we have a common interest. If we were to be here for a month instead of for three days the time would not be long enough for the half of them.

But in fact, as we all know, the matter is not so simple. We are busy men, all of us, and cannot afford to take time for anything that does not bear directly upon our work. To justify the continuance of such an association we must show not only that we have general interests in common, but that there are special objects to be met by our coming together, definite ends which our discussion may help us to realize.

It is clear that these ends must be one of two kinds: theoretical or practical. We are interested all of us, in a clearer definition of our task as theological teachers. We are interested equally in anything that we can learn from any quarter which will help us to discharge that task more effectively.

But no sooner do we begin to make earnest with either of these aspects of the case than we realize how serious are the obstacles to be faced. To begin with the theoretical difficulties. We are all alike Christians. We accept the principles of the Christian religion and have consecrated our lives to promote the advance of Christ's Kingdom in the world. We feel that the welfare of mankind depends on its accepting the message we have to bring and conforming its life to the principles we advocate. But alas! We are not ourselves fully agreed as to what that message is or what the acceptance of these principles involves. Our views differ as to matters of the deepest import for our common faith—as to the seat of authority in religion, as to the person of the Master we serve, as to the nature of the salvation He brings, as to the acceptable method of worshiping God, and above all, as to the institution which He has established as the organ of our common service and our common worship. And these differences do not concern the circumference of our faith merely. They penetrate

to its very core and center. There are acts of worship than which none are more sacred in the whole range of Christian experience that our consciences will not allow us to perform together. There are beliefs touching the central fact of our Christian faith on which we differ so widely that it is not possible for us as yet to live together within the bounds of a single Christian communion. How can we hope, differing as widely as we do, to find topics for consideration which we can approach with the freedom which is essential to profitable discussion without being brought face to face with such impassible barriers as to make further progress impossible?

On the practical side the difficulties are scarcely less serious. These grow out of the wide differences in the constituencies which we represent and the particular angle at which the educational problem presents itself to us. Some of us are teachers in denominational schools, training men for the service of a single Christian communion. Others are teachers in universities where theology is considered primarily as an academic subject and the problems of ecclesiastical relationship are negligible, while still others have consciously adopted the ideal of interdenominational religious education. We are training men side by side for the ministry of different churches with the double ideal of fitting them to serve intelligently and loyally in their own church and of giving them a sympathetic appreciation of the history and ideals of other churches. Again the preparation which our students bring with them differs widely. Some of us can take for granted a college education. Others accept men with less advanced preparation and must shape their curriculum accordingly. It is clear that the problems of the different groups differ with the differences in the subject-matter with which they have to deal. What interests one will be unimportant to the other. Where, then, shall we find common ground from which to start?

When a theologian is in trouble he is always inclined to go back to Schleiermacher. Good old Schleiermacher, who lived before the questions which divide us from so many of our fellow-teachers across the sea had risen above the horizon, and who can, therefore, be cited even in such an hour and such a gathering as this without fear of embarrassment. When Schleiermacher faced a difficulty he looked it in the face and turned it into a friend. "You despise religion," he said to the cultivated readers to whom he addressed his "Reden." "As a man interested in religion I want to find a point of contact from which we can both start. Very well, let us agree upon your contempt as something we can both take for granted."

Imitating Schleiermacher, I propose to you, as the first of the common interests which justify us in continuing our association of theological seminaries our differences. I mean this very seriously. I think the time has come when progress in theological education all along the line, in theory not less than in practice, depends upon an intelligent, painstaking, and sympathetic study of differences. Two attitudes have been taken in the past toward theological differences. On the one hand, men have condemned them; on the other, they have ignored them, or, what came to much the same thing, have made light of them as unimportant or negligible. Neither of these attitudes is adequate to meet the present situation. The differences are here and they are formidable. Condemnation will not remove them. Depreciation will not minimize them. It is time to understand them, and for this such an association as this offers us a unique opportunity.

It has always been important to do this. Unfortunate in its effects upon the man who is obliged to face the real issues of life, the departmental conception of education is never more disastrous than in religion; for religion is of all interests the most comprehensive. It affects the whole life and professes to make man acquainted with the all-embracing reality.

Especially is this true of a religion like Christianity which claims to give knowledge of the God who is all men's Father. For the Christian with the memory of Christ's high-priestly prayer vivid in his consciousness, differences of religious conviction are more than a puzzle. They are a tragedy, for they separate those whom it is God's will to join together. It becomes, then, a primary duty of the Christian to understand the differences in existing religion that so far as possible he may learn how to remove them, or, if that be not feasible, to minimize their divisive effects.

I say so far as possible, for there may be differences which it is beyond our power to minimize, far less to remove—such a difference, for example, as that between imperialism and democracy—the theory which insists that men fulfil their destiny as they submit their wills blindly to the direction of an autocratic state and the theory which sees in the state the expression of the common will of all the people as it has been ascertained through free discussion and expressed through representative institutions. Such a contrast as this—a contrast which expresses itself in religion, in the antithesis between ultramontaniam in all its forms and that impulse of the free spirit reaching out after immediate contact with God which gave birth to the movement which we call Protestantism and which in a hundred forms is today still struggling to find more adequate expression; such an antithesis as this, I repeat, admits of no resolution. It presents us with an alternative which cannot be evaded. It can be dealt with only through the submission or the conversion of one or the other of the two parties to the case.

But there are other differences not unimportant or recent in origin, differences rooted in fundamental qualities of temperament or age-long associations of history, whose significance is altered by understanding. I am thinking of such differences as those between the different types of the religious experience, between the mystic, the legalist, the

sacramentarian, and the unmetaphysical, common-sense type of Christian who finds his conception of religion best expressed in the definition of the writer of the Epistle of James. And those other differences, even more far-reaching in their effects because they are social as well as individual in character, the differences which grow out of historic tradition, and express themselves in the denominational loyalties which bind men to churches as different in their habits of thought and feeling as, let us say, the Protestant Episcopal and the Baptist. These differences in the form in which they meet us today are anything but negligible or unimportant. They keep people apart who ought to be working together. They limit our freedom of common action in those great corporate matters where Christians must speak and work together if speech or action is to be effective at all. They are, so far as we can see, permanent differences, as likely to last as the differences in color or type which separate the races. But that is no reason for believing that the effects which these differences now produce in sentiment or action will necessarily continue in their present form or that some way may not be found to make it possible for the unity which exists in spite of them, rather let me say through them, to express itself in common action and, what is quite as important, in common feeling.

How can we tell whether this will be so or not? Clearly in one way only, by understanding what these differences really are and whence they come; understanding them not in the abstract form in which they meet us in books where idea is set against idea in logical thesis or antithesis, but as they meet us in living men to whom they have emotional values as well and for whom they constitute integral parts of the complex of feeling, desire, aspiration, and loyalty that we call human life.

That, as I see it, is the first and greatest opportunity which this conference offers us—the opportunity of understanding one another better. For, we are all men who have

set our hands to a practical task of momentous importance. We are interested in our profession not simply as an occupation of the mind, a matter of natural interest and curiosity, but as a contribution to the great task of making the world a better place, and we want to know who are the men with whom we can co-operate in this enterprise, the men who share with us our major interest so keenly and intelligently that they will go to the limit with us in finding some way in which this dominant sympathy can express itself in spite of difference.

I say, we are men who are united by a practical purpose of far-reaching significance. There is, for example, the interest of securing the common recognition of the supreme place of religion in life. It was this which brought us together in the first place. We wanted to see that our boys whom the draft had taken from their homes and plunged into conditions of unexampled difficulty and responsibility were still surrounded by the safeguards which the home religion afforded. And when the war was over and the armistice came and the interrupted studies were taken up we wanted to see to it that those men who were looking forward to the ministry as a profession should have the same right to study under teachers of their own profession as was granted the engineer or the lawyer or the physician. And now that the armistice is over, and the world is turning to the tasks of peace, the same interest continues in an intensified form. We want to see to it that religion has its rightful place in this country of ours and makes its contribution to the ideals and purposes that are to shape our national future. We have learned from the study made by our Committee on the War and the Religious Outlook that religion is still a natural human interest, deep-seated in the human heart, only waiting the occasion to express itself, But we have learned also how weak and ineffective is the hold of the Church upon the imagination of the rank and file of our young men, how indefinite and vague are the conceptions which they hold of the central verities of our common faith,

and we desire to impress upon the imagination of men in general the fact that no solution of the great tasks which lie before us can be adequate or effective that ignores the dynamic which is laid up for our use in the religious nature of man or dispenses with the appeal which is provided by the institutions of historic religion.

But for this we must find some way of acting together in peace as we acted in war, of making the things that we hold in common, faith in God, in Jesus Christ, in the meaning of the universe, in a moral order, in the sinfulness of sin, in the ultimate triumph of right—we must find some way in which to make these things stand out before the imagination of the American people so that place shall be made for them as an integral element in the education of the rising generation.

Or again, take the interest that we have in securing and maintaining an educated ministry. Widely as we may differ in our conception of the kind of training that is desirable or the amount of knowledge which it is practicable to require of men who are to enter the ministry of the Christian church, we are at one in deprecating the growing tendency to short cuts into the ministry. There will be brought before this conference at another time certain facts as to the present source of supply of candidates to the ministry which give cause for serious thought to all who believe in maintaining the professional standards which have obtained in the past. There is a definite attempt being made on the part of a large and increasing number of institutions to claim for their own graduates full ministerial qualifications without putting them through the discipline which we have hitherto regarded as necessary for the preparation of the minister of the gospel. This movement raises questions too serious and far-reaching to be adequately dealt with by any individual seminary or group of seminaries. It is only as we come together, studying the whole question of theological education in all its bearings as it affects preparatory school and college as well as the

seminary curriculum itself that we shall be able to stay this tide which is sweeping us from our educational moorings and to maintain in forms the standard of an educated ministry adapted to the new conditions of the new age.

This does not mean that our present theological curriculum will continue unchanged. There is a whole group of questions that spring to mind on which I cannot even touch in this connection, questions as to the place of the study of the original languages, of church history, of systematic theology, and the other studies of the older curriculum in their relation to the newer studies which are growing up beside them and claiming to supplement if not to supersede them. But whether we believe that more or less radical changes in the curriculum are necessary we shall all be at one in feeling that if we are to stem the tide which is sweeping us from our moorings, we must in some way relate our theological teaching more definitely to the real world in which men are living today and to the vital interests which engross their most serious attention.

And this brings me to a third of the major interests which we have in common, the only one of which I shall have time still to speak, and that is the interest of securing the wider acceptance in our political and economic as well as in our social life of the principles of brotherhood, service, and faith that we all agree are central in the Christian religion.

There have been two great tendencies which have characterized the history of religion in the past. We may call them the otherworldly and the this-worldly, the tendency which thinks of religion as a means of fitting man for another world and a different life and the tendency which would use religion to transform this world and this life. This contrast is, I believe, so deeply rooted in human nature that it will never be outgrown. In Christianity as in other religions there will always be Christians of these two types and we shall make little progress in our effort after unity if we ignore this fact or

try to force either group into the mold of the other. But whether our Christianity be of one or other of these two types, whether religion mean to us fundamentally a way of fitting men in this world for life in another or a way of making this world over after the pattern set in the mount we shall all agree that *while we are living in this world* Christians should live according to Christian principles and that their lives in all their different aspects of them should conform to the standard which Jesus has set. And this, we must regretfully admit, is not the case today, for what we profess on Sunday of brotherhood and service is too often contradicted by the very conditions into which the necessities of our life plunge us on Monday. We are living in a world where competition in the most rigorous and uncompromising forms rules our business and our politics. We are living in a time of peace under an ethics which is at heart, as we are coming to see more clearly every day, an ethics of war, and we realize, even the most conservative of us, that if we are to make Christianity mean what it must to the great mass of men and women who are struggling for a better social life in a world where there is so much that would crowd it out, we must find some way of giving united witness to that eternal principle of love which lies at the very heart of our Christian faith and makes it what it is.

Only in the light of these great common purposes can the importance of the differences of which I have been speaking be fully appreciated. For these differences, I repeat, are not only differences of theory. They are definite obstacles which prevent us from working together in the very fields where unity is most important.

Take any one of the fields in which our students will be called upon to work—the pastorate, teaching, missions in the largest sense—and we are face to face with the disheartening and hampering fact of the differences between Christians. There is the matter of the local church. What a scandal it is

that where there are such areas of unoccupied territory we should be wasting our energies in maintaining in a single country village or small community three or four struggling and competing churches, no one of them paying its minister a living wage, no one of them rendering the many-sided and comprehensive ministry that would be possible if all were combined. We recognize that the present situation is intolerable and yet we do not correct it. Why? Because we have not yet learned to see things in their proportion and feel the problem of Christianizing America as a single problem at which we must work together if we are to succeed at all.

There is the matter of religious education, in all its many phases, in the church, in the community, in the theological seminary itself. How inadequate, for example, is the modern Sunday school for the burden of responsibility which is placed upon it and what thousands and hundreds of thousands of children there are in the congested districts of our great cities who are not in Sunday schools at all. There are the boys and girls in our high schools and colleges, the young men and women in our state universities, the great mass of foreigners coming to this country without knowledge of our institutions or sympathetic understanding of the genius of our free Protestantism. There are the earnest men and women in the labor movement working in their own way to secure a better social order and to realize the ideal of democracy in industry, but too often alienated from the church and in ignorance of her ideals. Surely, if we are to deal adequately with a situation like this, we must do it together. We who are the teachers of the teachers of religion must together study the field as a whole, map out a nation-wide program and train the young men under our instruction to take their part in carrying it out.

Why do we not do it? Again because of the differences which divide us; because we have not come to see eye to eye ourselves as to the great objective; because we have not discriminated clearly between the differences that grow out of an

irreconcilable conflict of conviction and those which, while formidable, are yet consistent with mutual sympathy and cordial co-operation in pursuit of the greater ends we hold in common.

What is true of the pastorate and of education is true of Christian missions in the widest sense. Here at least it is clear that if we are to succeed at all we must work together. It is from the foreign field that the call to unity sounds most clearly. It is in the foreign field that the most significant experiments in union are being tried. It is in its bearing upon the missionary enterprise in the largest sense that our home differences become most formidable and most disheartening.

Who is to deal with such a situation if not we? We, I repeat, are the teachers of the teachers of religion. We are training the men who are to mold the Christian sentiment of the future. It is from us that they must learn the meaning of the differences that divide us, that they may be taught how to overcome them.

For they are being overcome; that is the interesting and inspiring feature in the situation. The movement toward Christian unity of which I have been speaking has long passed the experimental stage. For generations we have been studying this problem of unity in difference and we have gathered a body of experience which ought to be part of the curriculum of every theological seminary in the country. There is the co-operative movement in the foreign field which expresses itself in such great facts as the Edinburgh and Panama conferences, and the various organizations to which they have given rise, the Continuation Committees, the Foreign Missions Conference, the Laymen's Missionary Movement, the Missionary Education Movement, not to speak of the different union institutions on the foreign field. There is the co-operative movement at home which expresses itself in the Federal Council, the Home Missions Council, the Council of Church Boards of Education, and the various local federations

of churches multiplying rapidly in our great cities. There are the great lay organizations, the Young Men's and the Young Women's Christian Associations. There is the movement for organic unity in all its different forms. In addition, no less instructive because not yet so fully in the public eye, there are the various local experiments in unity which are being tried all over the country in constantly new and surprising ways.

The impulse to unity which had already found these different forms of expression has been mightily reinforced by the experiences of the last six years. Here, as in so many other sides of our Christian life, the war has been a great teacher. Things that seemed impossible before proved feasible when we faced what all recognized as an unescapable duty. Beginning the war each with our own independent organization, before the armistice came we had developed machinery through which we could function as one.

And yet this great story, so fascinating in its suggestion, so rich in its instruction, is far too little known. What place have we as yet made in our seminary curriculum for the study of the co-operative movement? Above all, what have we done to teach men the philosophy which underlies successful co-operation so that they may approach its difficulties understandingly and plan with some hope of success? Is it too much to say that one reason why the Interchurch World Movement failed to reach the great success which its advocates anticipated was for lack of the preliminary study of the conditions of success? More is needed for unity than good will, however essential this must be. There must be a knowledge of the nature of the difficulties to be overcome, a willingness to learn from the past, a disposition to build upon whatever has already been attained that we may go on to something better.

Is there not here, I repeat, an opportunity for such a conference as this? For the problem of unity in difference

which as Christians we face in the church is only part of a larger problem of unity in difference which meets us the round world over, and there as here there is no short cut to success. It is not only for lack of good will that the League of Nations which opened so promisingly is for the time being under a cloud. It is because the difficulties in the way were underestimated and a short cut sought to ends for which the needed understanding had not yet been reached, or the needed preparation been made. But the way is forward, not back, and it is we who must point the way. With whatever else we may be able to dispense in the new world that is building, the teacher certainly must hold his place. For it is the teacher who takes the long look and it is the long look which determines in the end where men will go.